

# Knitting for Snow Leopards

by Tom McCarthy and  
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Herding families in Mongolia are busy this winter turning their camel, sheep and cashmere wool into gloves, hats, and scarves as part of a snow leopard *Uncia uncia* conservation project. The program is known as Irbis Enterprises (*irbis* being the Mongolian word for snow leopard), and aims to establish a much needed outlet for the semi-nomadic herder's livestock products, while providing a conservation benefit to wildlife.

As in other parts of their range, conflicts between snow leopards and humans in Mongolia present a serious conservation challenge. Poaching of cats occurs, and livestock grazing puts pressure on natural prey populations. On the other hand, snow leopards commonly prey on domestic stock and competition for grazing land is increasing. Over the course of our long-term research in Mongolia we have spent substantial time with herders who live in snow leopard habitat to better understand these issues, and to gain a perception of the herders' lives and needs. Assisting nomads to increase their household income while fostering local appreciation for nature conservation, snow leopards in particular, was the impetus for

developing Irbis Enterprises.

In summer 1998 we initiated the program in two communities adjacent to large protected areas containing snow leopard. One was in Uvs Aimag in north-western Mongolia and the other in Gobi-Altai on the northern edge of the Great Gobi National Park and Biosphere Reserve. Community meetings were held near summer encampments to explain the program and determine interest and skill level of local participants. Park biologists explained the need to protect snow leopards, using examples of other large cats that are close to extinction because of human pressure. Irbis Enterprises was presented as a way for the Protected Area and international conservation NGOs to help herders increase their household income in return for local help in protecting snow leopards. Samples of handicrafts were then purchased for market research in Ulaanbaatar, the capital.

The results of our marketing study were very positive, indicating that hand-crafted products with wildlife motifs, and sold as "Snow Leopard Friendly", would be popular among eco-aware tourists. We returned to the herding communities in autumn to set up cooperatives, order products, and establish a system for local management of collection and quality control. Herders were contracted to produce a total of nearly 2,000 items over the winter. Quality and style requirements were explained in detailed drawings. Local coordinators were selected from among the herding community.

### **Conservation linkage**

Products will be collected from local sites in May and each family will be paid a base price for their goods. A bonus of 20% will be awarded in November of this year if all terms of the contract have been met. The bonus forms the most immediate link between income generation and wildlife conservation. The entire community will lose the bonus if any herder illegally kills a snow leopard, ibex *Capra ibex* or argali *Ovis vignei*, thus individual incentive is enhanced

by peer pressure. Individual producers will lose bonuses for other violations of national wildlife laws or grazing regulations in the Protected Area Buffer Zones. Compliance will be monitored by protected area rangers and biologists.

The project also offers less tangible but important conservation linkages. Because Irbis Enterprises is administered through the local Protected Area, it is fostering a positive perception of the reserves. Herders are also gaining a greater appreciation of the international interest in Mongolia's unique natural heritage, and of wildlife issues in general.

### **Self-sustaining**

Irbis Enterprises aims to be entirely self-sustaining in the near term. Outside funds now cover initial set-up costs and seed money to buy the first year's products. While the majority of profits go directly to herders, all transport, marketing and internal salaries will be budgeted for from sales receipts. Already people with very specific responsibilities manage the project at the community level and a national coordinator is in training. The need for international involvement will be reduced as local stakeholders become increasingly aware of the potential benefits and improve output and efficiency from within.

### **Future expansion**

Other protected areas and international conservation NGOs in Mongolia have expressed an interest in the Irbis Enterprises

concept, indicating an opportunity exists for internal expansion. At the outset we determined that a strong demand for this type of hand-crafted "Snow Leopard Friendly" product also exists in western markets, making it potentially viable to pursue this concept internationally. Although during the pilot year we elected to sell only to tourists within Mongolia, we are now exploring possibilities on the international handicraft market, either by exporting to foreign retailers or by direct sales over the Internet. A project of this scale might require substantial initial input, yet the contribution towards conservation in Mongolia could be crucial to the sustainable development of ecosystems and the people within.

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